The difference between obligatory and non-obligatory grammatical categories in 'thinking for speaking'

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Slobin (1996; 2003; 2008) has shown that the presence of a grammatically encoded category directs speakers in the 'thinking for speaking' process. In experiments with children, Slobin focuses on the expression of progressive aspect, e.g. the present and past continuous in English as compared to other languages which lack such a category. However, Slobin does not distinguish between *obligatory* and *non-obligatory* categories: while both are encoded form-meaning pairings in a language's grammar (cf. Levinson 2000, Belligh & Willems 2021), only the former *must* be used in speech in specific contexts.

Dutch has a dedicated construction that encodes the progressive aspect, viz. the '*aan het* construction' (ANS, 2012, Van Pottelberge, 2004, Flecken 2011, Behrens et al. 2013). However, unlike the continuous in English, the '*aan het* construction' in Dutch is non-obligatory. Speakers can choose this construction (1) or a semantically underspecified verb form that does not encode the progressive aspect (2):

(1) *De kinderen zijn aan het spelen.*
the children are at the play-INF
'The children are playing.'

(2) *De kinderen spelen.*
the children play-PRES.3pl
'The children play/are playing.'

We explore whether the influence of an encoded category with regard to 'thinking for speaking' depends on being obligatory or non-obligatory. Forty-three six-year-old speakers of Dutch were asked to describe what activities they see in pictures presented to them consecutively under two conditions: (1) a spontaneous condition and (2) a condition where they are prompted to use the '*aan het* construction' by drawing their attention to ongoing activities represented in the pictures.

Most children initially did not use the '*aan het* construction' to express the progressive aspect. This is at variance with what 'thinking for speaking' predicts, given that the '*aan het* construction' encodes the progressive aspect as a form-meaning pairing "enshrined" (Slobin, 1996) in the grammar of Dutch. However, most participants use the '*aan het* construction' when prompted, which shows that they attend to a grammatical category that is available in the grammar without being obligatory. These findings call for an adjustment of Slobin's (1996; 2003; 2008) account: being a grammatically encoded category is a necessary but no

sufficient condition for 'thinking for speaking', as the encoded category must also be obligatory, yet non-obligatory encoded categories also have a bearing on 'thinking for speaking' under specific conditions.

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